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A snake is a very astute creature. It is resilient to climate change, hibernates to conserve energy and will protect its territory from interlopers. While snake attacks do not express either malice or virtue, its first bite is often retaliatory rather than offensive. A human on the other hand is invasive, insensitive and destructive. To animals, humans are often loathsome due to their pervasively obnoxious preponderance.

Human hunters have a long history of killing wild animals and the very environment which nurtures all life, by any means possible, for profit. America is the present manifestation of the human hunter. Many years ago, their ancestors introduced voracious locusts and myriad parasites into distant lands after defoliating vast areas of pristine forest.

Ecologically, Western landscapes can be said to have been raised by wolves. In recent times, they have re-introduced marauding wolf packs into its distant territories, using them to keep a docile populace in check. These unrelenting carnivores descended on hitherto relatively peaceful environments and decimated their wildlife.

The high-powered human hunter states it is tracking down and killing grand beasts which pose 'an imminent threat' to his far-off trophy home and vacation ranch. Instead it manages to slaughter entire colonies of small herbivores, while the stature of noble beasts only grows larger.

Over the years, the delicate ecosystems have been deliberately destroyed along the oil-belt of the planet, and the deer and elk populations are now ruled by coyotes and stalked by hyenas. Foxes have also proliferated, preying on the smaller bunnies. The

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predators ravage their helpless prey. The lands once most robust and filled with springs, birds, insects and animals are now "infested" with snakes, as their eating habits and temperaments are rather different. Most other surviving species now envy the snakes' revered position. To the human hunter their presence is inconvenient, repellant and puts their interests at risk.

The potential for clashes between snakes and the human hunter is bound to increase. The foxes promote other humans' existential fear of snakes as being always ready to strike, whereas their first line of defence is silence and hope they are not seen. If that fails, a snake would flee. If cornered, it would feign aggression in the hope that the aggressor will go away. Only as a last resort will it strike in self-defence...

The fascination with snakes runs as deep as the fear they invoke. Snakes are erotic, phallic and undulating, mysterious and wholly "other". In the dance between nature and culture, the snake will become the serpent, a potent player in religion, folklore and dreams, to the disenfranchised and oppressed.

Once upon a time, lions, crocodiles, sharks, eagles and bears reminded us of our limits and vulnerabilities. We were well aware that every creature fed on, or was in turn food for some other creature. Indigenous peoples who lived among predators as well as prey, were smart about avoidance based on close observation and a natural sense of respect.

We can still learn. Mindful respect is key. Man is not sovereign. The might acquired by man's ingenuity does not make him noble. A hunter with a high-powered gun, drunk on power is beneath contempt. We must retain our source of pride while respecting others with profound humility. Hubris and hegemony must be abandoned.

We must attempt to recover some of that lost humility in our damaged world and begin to appreciate the contribution of all species and overcome our fears and prejudice.

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Photos - Chinthaka Wijesooriya

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